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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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It's been another one of those long and arduous weeks around here - plenty of work either on the job or working at home. But, as most of you know all too well, it's stuff that has to be done. And at this time of the year, it's leaves and more leaves! The trees, after some good rainstorms and days with gusty winds, are almost bare. Hopefully it will only take one or two more days out there cleaning them up; and then I'll be finished for another fall season. We'll see.

As is typical for Joe this time of the year, I'm sure that in his column this week, he'll mention a reminder to you all about making a donation of food to a local food pantry or something comparable. It's a reminder that needs to be made on occasion.

My wife and I did something this week that, now that I think about it, is an act similar to helping the needy. As you might recall, we're avid dog lovers. Over the years, we've rescued three dogs from area shelters; and they've become loved members of our family. A couple of years ago, we lost one of them, and then adopted a "cast-off" greyhound a few months later.

Every once in awhile my wife or I take a look at the shelter's web site to see what kinds of dogs are waiting to be adopted. We jokingly comment how we'd like to adopt a bunch more, but we also realize that to do so wouldn't be the best thing to do, for us. Facts are, taking care of dogs, while an amazing source of enjoyment and affection, requires a lot of work. It wouldn't be fair to have a house full of dogs and not be able to give them all the attention that they deserve. However, that doesn't stop us from looking!

Earlier in the week, I happened to look at the shelter site again. There were a lot of great-looking dogs - all types and sizes. Personally, I enjoy the "real" dogs - larger breeds, the active types. But, there was one dog shown on the site that attracted my attention - not so much for the type of dog, but the write-up that accompanied the picture. This was a 6-year old female chihuahua. Yes, a small dog. But what got me intrigued was learning that this dog, "Precious", has Cushing's Disease, a terminal disease. Just knowing that with the couple of dozen of dogs available, it was likely going to be a slim chance that this small dog was going to garner much attention. Seriously, most people are interested in puppies, or healthy "older" dogs. What are the chances someone is going to take a second look at a dog that may only live another year or so? No, it's not cruel, but it's realistic.

But somehow, something in me made me realize that this dog was facing a questionable future. It just didn't seem fair that she should be faced

with the possibility of spending her last days in a shelter. Sure, she'd be given the best care, but what she really needed was a caring home. So, I mentioned it to my wife and suggested that we should look into possibly adopting this dog. But, I wanted to check into Cushing's Disease, and find out the financial needs to care for the dog - medication and other treatment.

We went to the shelter the next day, bringing our two dogs to see how they interacted. The three dogs seemed to get along, at least negative behavior! We sat down and talked to one of the shelter counselors, and expressed interest. Our concern over medications and some treatments were quickly negated when we learned that the shelter would take care of the costs of medication and quarterly blood-testing. Routine check-ups and annual treatments were something that we figured was manageable, or we wouldn't even consider another dog.

And, of course another positive factor was that Precious seemed to take to us! So, my wife and I looked at each other, and we both knew that this was something the wanted, and needed to do. We wanted this dog to spend whatever remaining time it had left to be in a good home. And now she is!

So, I guess it's fairly appropriate for this time of the year, with Thanksgiving less than a week away. for us to be able to find a "different" way to give thanks, as well as help "someone" else.

Enjoy your Thanksgiving holiday, and try to remember how this holiday came about and why we celebrate it. Sure, there's turkey and all the fixin's, football games, and more. Family is another important part of it. A good reason to give thanks is the all-important reason, however.

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING

compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. If you read Dana's editorial last week, then you know that I finally found one of those "job" things. I'm in the process of settling in and getting accustomed to my new 'situation', as they used to call it. It's a tough job, but a pretty good one, and I'm finding that I like the job and the people. I'm quality assurance manager at a small-ish manufacturer. Lots of stuff to do, lots of stuff to learn. I'm hanging in there... and so are they. [grin]

But switching subjects here, I want to talk a little bit about one of my pet interests: High energy physics. No, I'm not educated in particle physics or anything, but it's always interested me, and I can grasp some of the simpler concepts involved... sometimes.

Well, this past week scientists at the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) were actually able to create... wait for it... antimatter!

Yes, that’s right, trekkies. Real, honest to goodness antimatter. It’s been done before, actually, antimatter electrons, or positrons, have been made in the lab for quite a while now. But what’s different this time is that the scientists at CERN were able to create antiprotons along with the antielectrons and ’mate’ them so to speak to make anti-hydrogen.

This is a fairly big achievement, to put it lightly, since antimatter is so difficult to deal with. As you might know, antimatter and matter annihilate each other when they come into contact with each other, releasing large amounts of energy... incredible amounts, actually.

So creating antimatter... any antimatter... is a big deal. There are certain radioactive elements that decay and shed antiparticles, by the way. The PET scans that are often used in medical scans. Yep, PET stands for Positron Emission Tomography. Basically (and this is a very simplified version), they inject a radioactive substance bonded to sugar molecules into you, give it a little time to circulate through your body and for your tissues to grab onto the sugar to use as food. The radioactive substance, being bonded to the sugar, is drawn in too. Over a short amount of time, the stuff decays and emits, among its various byproducts, positrons. When the positrons meet up with electrons, they annihilate one another and produce gamma rays (if I remember correctly). Each annihilation results in 2 gamma rays, heading in different directions. Sensors pick up the ’matched pairs’ and they’re traced back to their point of origin. Active muscle (and cancer cells) ’eat’ a lot of sugar for energy, so the more gamma rays that are traced back to a particular area, the more energy they’re using. This is a good way to see ’soft tissue’, since they use more energy than bone does.

But creating antimatter this way isn’t useful for physics research. To be useful for scientific research, there’s got to be another way. Slamming stuff together at very high speeds (approaching the speed of light) and capturing the resulting anti-particles requires that a lot of things be taken into account. There’s the need for those huge superconducting magnets to contain and speed the stream of particles, a vacuum to keep the antiparticles from meeting up with their mirror counterparts and, maybe most importantly, a way to contain any antimatter you’re lucky enough to make.

Think about it; how do you contain something that will not only explode when it comes into contact with normal matter, but causes whatever it comes into contact with to blow up too?

As some of you may know, the answer is a sort of "magnetic bottle" or trap. Think of it as a Thermos, but with magnetic fields instead of that silvery glass. Inside the trap is mostly vacuum. Otherwise the newly created and trapped antimatter would come into contact with its counterpart and both would be instantly converted from matter to energy. The energies involved are equally incredible. Positrons are created by, basically, slamming things together. Think of it as firing a stream of very hot, very fast ’stuff’ like a bullet fired at a target and then ’catching’ the fragments that come flying off. That’s what those big superconducting magnets we’ve all heard about are for. It takes such a strong magnetic field to contain this stream or, in my analogy up above, "the bullet", that whizzes around the large tunnel... 17 miles of it... going faster and faster, spurred on by those superconducting magnets, slamming into another stream of particles going just as fast in the opposite direction and, to use a physics term... BLAMMO!

Now comes the fun part. Not only do you have to keep these new

anti-particles from touching their twins, you have to slow them down. They're incredibly hot and, therefore, incredibly energetic and traveling at a large percentage of the speed of light. If you're going to keep them safe and sound, you've got to slow them down. The best way so far to do that is with lasers; 'cooling' them with light.

So let's pretend for a moment that we understand how all of that is done. From there, you have to keep these puppies from wandering around and banging into anything with 'normal matter'.

THAT is why antihydrogen is interesting. You see, if all you have is, say, positrons (aka anti-electrons), they all have the same charge (positive) and repel each other. They ricochet here and there and bounce around until they hit something and... boom.

But antihydrogen is a bit different. Since hydrogen is neutral, so is anti-hydrogen. That means that individual atoms of antihydrogen won't repel each other; they just kind of exist side by side. Now you have antimatter that doesn't fight itself, only its matter counterpart. Under the right circumstances, you can compress it into a gas, or maybe even a liquid. And maybe, just maybe, if you can cool and compress it enough, hydrogen ice.

From there, if you can control how you handle it, you can actually control the flow of it and let meet up with regular hydrogen and actually create energy. Huge amounts of energy. That's why the starships in Star Trek used antimatter. The energy produced when matter and antimatter meet is far, far beyond what we're used to with our petroleum based engines.

This latest experiment proved that we (or at least they) can create, trap and release in a controlled manner, antihydrogen.

So is the age of energy from antimatter right around the corner? Unfortunately, no. For one thing, it's incredibly expensive, for another, it's incredibly difficult. And perhaps most importantly, we create incredibly little of it.

The CERN experiment, at a cost of millions upon millions of dollars, created and trapped 38 antihydrogen atoms. Yes, that's right. Thirty eight. More were created (although I'm not sure of how many more), but 38 of them were trapped and released in a 'controlled' manner. By comparison, a single grain of salt is composed of somewhere around 10000000000000000 atoms. And when physicists talk about time, they don't quite have the same scale as we do. When they say they captured and released these atoms, they're talking about one sixth of a second. Yep. Millions upon millions of dollars, 38 atoms and 172 milliseconds. And ya know what? It's worth every penny.

So what exactly is this whole thing good for? Well, for one thing, we can study it. You see, according to current theory, when the Universe began, almost 14 billion years ago, there SHOULD have been equal amounts of matter and antimatter created. So where did it go? IS there a difference that we're not seeing? Are there things about antimatter and, by extension, physics itself that we don't understand yet? Are there galaxies out there somewhere composed entirely of antimatter? Did matter and antimatter go in different directions when the Universe was born, driven by fundamental forces that no longer exist or that changed a billionth of a second after things started? We don't know. But it'd be cool to find out, wouldn't it?

Oh, one last thing. It’s totally unrelated to antimatter, but this coming week is Thanksgiving. When you go shopping this weekend, pick up a couple of extra things... cans of food, bags of this and that, maybe... if you’re doing well enough for yourself, a turkey... and drop it off at the local shelter or food share. You know what I’m talking about. Things are still tough out there, and if you can swing it, do a little to help someone else out. Heck, make it a family thing and take the kids with you and let them pick out a couple of things. If YOUR kids pick them out, you can pretty much bet that someone else’s kids would like it. And you’ll not only be helping someone out, you’ll be making yourself a little more thankful, believe me. But over and above that, you can show your kids what they (and you) have to be thankful for. And I guarantee you, you’ll see in your children’s’ eyes the reflection of what you always wanted to be. Give it a shot. What have you got to lose; a couple of cans of cranberry sauce?

Have a happy, healthy and save holiday. Enjoy yourself, enjoy those around you. And come on back next week, safe and sound, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - Majority Want Video Game Laws!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Atari’s Yars’ Revenge Is Back!

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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Atari’s Classic Arcade Shooter Yars’ Revenge
Is Back With New Cinematic Gaming Experience

30 years ago Yars’ Revenge took the gaming world by storm as one of the first arcade shooters and became the best-selling original title for the Atari 2600. Now three decades later, gamers will once again get the chance to avenge the annihilated race of the Yar. Atari, one of the world’s most recognized publishers and producers of interactive entertainment will unleash Yars’ Revenge onto Xbox LIVE Arcade for the Xbox 360 video game and entertainment system from Microsoft, PlayStationNetwork and Windows PC Download in Q1 2011.

Yars’ Revenge brings the legendary title to new artistic heights with an anime inspired art style and captivating narrative that expands upon the original story. The game also features local co-op gameplay, multiple

endings, intense battles, and visually striking landscapes designed to appeal to both casual and hardcore gamers.

In Yars', players will take on the role of a nameless Yar, who has been brainwashed by the evil Qotile empire to do their bidding. After being shot down and rescued by the ancient and mysterious Bar Yargler, she sets off on a ferociously focused mission, to seek revenge on her former master and his deadly squad of assassins. The bio-technological nightmare of the Qotile home world provides stunning backdrops for players to fly through in aerial combat with their enemy.

"Yars' Revenge is one of the most popular Atari games of all time, leaving fans eager to experience the next chapter," says Jim Wilson, President and CEO of Atari, Inc. "The new Yars' Revenge updates this classic with anime inspired art direction, intense aerial battles and local co-op gameplay."

Developed by Killspace Entertainment, Yars' Revenge will be available in early 2011.

Majority in Favor of Video Game Laws, Poll Says

Although most Americans are concerned about the level of violence in video games, those with children are slightly less worried than those without, according to a recent study.

In the latest Rasmussen poll, 70 percent of child-less adults surveyed said they were either "very concerned" or "somewhat concerned," about levels of violence in video games, compared to 65 percent of parents. Furthermore, parents were far more likely to assume the chief role of limiting a child's exposure to in-game sex and violence.

Still, 54 percent of those polled thought video games led to violent behavior. Unsurprisingly, the concern increases by age and skews towards women above 40.

Despite the fact that the Supreme Court is debating the merits of an age requirement for violent video games, parents believe they, not the government, should play a chief role in limiting a child's exposure to violent video games. Seventy-one percent of those surveyed believed parents should have the most responsibility. Only 5 percent thought it was up to the government.

The survey of 1,000 adults nationwide was conducted on November 8-9, 2010.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

U.S. Sees "Huge" Cyber Threat in the Future

The United States faces a major threat in the future from cyber technologies that will require civil-military coordination to shield networks from attack, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said on Tuesday.

"I think there is a huge future threat. And there is a considerable current threat," Gates told The Wall Street Journal CEO Council. "And that’s just the reality that we all face."

The U.S. Defense Department estimates that over 100 foreign intelligence organizations have attempted to break into U.S. networks. Every year, hackers also steal enough data from U.S. government agencies, businesses and universities to fill the U.S. Library of Congress many times over, officials say.

The Pentagon’s biggest suppliers - including Lockheed Martin Corp, Boeing Co and Northrop Grumman Corp - are investing in the growing market for cyber technology, estimated at up to $140 billion a year worldwide.

Gates said the U.S. military had made considerable progress protecting its own sites and was working with its private-sector partners "to bring them under that umbrella."

But how to allow Pentagon know-how to be applied to protecting domestic infrastructure can be tricky for legal reasons, including fear of violating civil liberties.

"The key is the only defense that the United States has against nation-states and other potential threats in the cyber-world is the National Security Agency," Gates said, referring to the super-secretive Defense Department arm that shields national security information and networks, and intercepts foreign communications.

"You cannot replicate the National Security Agency for domestic affairs. There isn’t enough money. There isn’t enough time. And there isn’t enough human talent."

Last month, President Barack Obama’s administration announced steps to allow greater cooperation between the NSA and the Department of Homeland Security. That includes stationing the DHS’ privacy, civil liberties and legal personnel at the NSA.

"So you have the domestic security agency, DHS, being able to reach into NSA in a real-time way to get the kind of protection we need," Gates said.

"And my hope is that over time that will lead to better protections for both ’.gov’ and ’.com.’"

McAfee Reports Malware at All-Time High

McAfee today revealed its McAfee Threat Report for the third quarter of 2010. Information like that provided by McAfee in these quarterly reports is valuable for IT admins - enabling them to keep a finger on the pulse of malware, and to stay in touch with emerging attack techniques and

trends.

With the holiday shopping season upon us, cyber criminals will be pulling out all the stops and shifting into high gear to capitalize on the spike in online transactions and part naive or gullible users from both their personal information and their money. Businesses and consumers both need to be on high alert and take a more proactive stance to guard against attacks.

McAfee press release about the McAfee Threat Report states, "average daily malware growth has reached its highest levels, with an average of 60,000 new pieces of malware identified per day, almost quadrupling since 2007," adding, "At the same time, spam levels decreased in volume this quarter, both globally and in local geographies. Spam hit a two year low this quarter while malware continued to soar."

McAfee warns that, "Most recently, cybercriminals unleashed a Zeus botnet that is aimed at mobile devices and designed to intercept SMS messages to validate transactions. As a result, the criminal can perform all bank transactions, stealing funds from unsuspecting victims. McAfee also saw an increase in email campaigns attempting to deliver the Zeus botnet, under the disguise of the following recognized organization names: eFAX, FedEx, Internal Revenue Service, Social Security Administration, United States Postal Service and Western Union."

This report looks in-depth at the Stuxnet worm, which appears to have been crafted specifically to target the nuclear facility capabilities of Iran. More relevant to most IT admins, though, are the findings and analysis of social engineering attacks, and the potential risks associated with social networking.

"Our Q3 Threat report shows that cyber criminals are not only becoming more savvy, but attacks are becoming increasingly more severe," said Mike Gallagher, senior vice president and chief technology officer of Global Threat Intelligence for McAfee. "Cyber criminals are doing their homework, and are aware of what’s popular, and what’s insecure. They are attacking mobile devices and social networking sites, so education about user activity online, as well as incorporating the proper security technologies are of utmost importance."

As a security vendor, it could be argued that McAfee has a vested interest in alarming IT managers and the general public regarding computer security issues. It would be a sort of self-serving, and self-fulfilling prophecy to create a panic that drives sales of computer and network security tools.

I have never bought into the conspiracy theory that security vendors incite fear to boost sales. It would be a thinly-veiled con, and the short term gain would damage the reputation of the vendor and lead to irreparable long term harm.

McAfee has nothing to gain - at least not long term - from "crying wolf". The other way of looking at reports such as this is that McAfee - by virtue of being a major security vendor with an army of security researchers and customers scattered around the globe - is in a unique position to collect and study relevant data in order to provide expert analysis to identify trends and work more proactively to develop more effective security measures.

Pentagon Says "Aware" of China Internet Rerouting

The Defense Department is aware that Internet traffic was rerouted briefly through China earlier this year, a Pentagon spokesman said on Friday, referring to what a congressionally appointed panel has described as a hijack.

The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission charged in its annual report on Wednesday that state-owned China Telecom advertised erroneous network routes that instructed "massive volumes" of U.S. and other foreign Internet traffic to go through Chinese servers during an 18-minute stretch on April 8.

Marine Colonel David Lapan, a Defense Department spokesman, told reporters, "We're aware that on the 8th of April ... Internet traffic was rerouted through China."

He added at one point that he did not know if "we've determined whether that particular incident ... was done with some malicious intent or not."

Moments later, he said there was no evidence that anything malicious had occurred, a position he repeated when pressed about the discrepancy in his remarks.

The U.S.-China Commission in its 2010 report said the incident affected traffic to and from U.S. government and military sites, including those for Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' office, the armed forces and some commercial websites.

In Beijing, China's Foreign Ministry on Friday condemned the commission's report on China's military capabilities and economic policies, saying it distorted reality and was symptomatic of Cold War thinking.

China Telecom separately has denied the charge that it "hijacked" U.S. Internet traffic by sending false notifications that prompted other servers to route traffic through China on the assumption that it was the most efficient path.

The commission said the evidence did not clearly show whether the incident was perpetrated intentionally "and, if so, to what ends. However, computer security researchers have noted that the capability could enable severe malicious activities," the report said.

Commissioner Larry Wortzel, a retired U.S. Army colonel who served two tours as a military attache in China, told reporters that the incident could have let someone mine email addresses and then send authentic-looking messages bearing attachments with malicious code or other harmful software.

"When I see things like this happen, I ask: 'Who might be interested in all the communication from the entire Department of Defense and the federal government? It's probably not a graduate student from Shanghai University,'" Wortzel said on Wednesday.

Lapan, the Pentagon spokesman, said the Defense Department's internal networks would not have been affected by any improper rerouting of traffic through Chinese servers.

"We do have tools to protect any of the traffic that goes outside" the internal networks, he added, referring to encryption and devices that warn when Internet traffic is being rerouted.

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, who led a Senate Intelligence Committee cyber task force that submitted a classified report to the panel in July on cyber threats, said on Wednesday that certain threats cannot be countered without the U.S. government's unique "authorities and capabilities."

In a Senate floor speech, the Rhode Island Democrat reiterated a proposal to create a "dot.secure" domain to protect crucial U.S. services such as power grids, financial networks, transportation and communications hubs.

"We simply cannot leave that core infrastructure on which the life and death of Americans depends without better security," Whitehouse said.

The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission was set up in 2000 to examine the security implications of growing economic ties with China.

Dean Cheng, an expert on Chinese security issues at the conservative Heritage Foundation, said the alleged Internet hijacking appeared to be part of what he described as a disturbing pattern of aggressive Chinese cyber activities.

"All of this suggests that, from China's view, a global conflict is already underway - in the virtual world of cyberspace," he wrote. "The ability to redirect vast amounts of data constitutes a threat, not only to national security, but also to private companies and individuals, as their information, too, has now been put at risk."

Facebook Takes On Google and Yahoo in Web Messages

Facebook rolled out an all-in-one messaging service that for the first time allows its half-billion members to communicate with people outside the social network, intensifying a battle with Google Inc and Yahoo Inc. for users' Internet time.

Addressing speculation the world's largest social networking site was planning a "Gmail-killer," Facebook Chief Executive Officer Mark Zuckerberg said the new system will let users own "@facebook.com" addresses, but stressed it went beyond mere email.

The new feature - to be rolled out over coming months - lets users send and receive instant and text messages in addition to standard email and Facebook notes.

"This is not an email killer. This is a messaging system that includes email as one part of it," Zuckerberg told reporters at the St. Regis hotel in San Francisco.

Zuckerberg, who said more than 350 million of Facebook's half-billion users now actively send and receive messages on his website, did not expect people to stop using traditional email tomorrow.

But he hoped more and more will shift to an integrated, cross-platform mode of communications over the longer term, such as the service he debuted Monday.

Analysts say that email users are particularly valuable to Web portals like Yahoo, which seek to funnel the traffic into their other online services.

Facebook and Google’s intensifying rivalry is expected to play a crucial role in shaping the future of the Internet. The industry is closely watching their pitched struggle for Web surfers’ time online, advertising dollars, and increasingly costly Silicon Valley talent.

Forrester Research analyst Augie Ray said the new messaging service will help Facebook in its quest for user-engagement.

"What this allows is Facebook to become more central to people’s communications, and with that they have more (of people’s) time, they have more page views, and with that they have the opportunity to serve more ads," Ray said.

More than 4 billion messages get sent everyday through Facebook, whose backers include Digital Sky Technologies, Microsoft, Hong Kong tycoon Li Ka-shing and venture capital firms Accel Partners, Greylock Partners and Meritech Capital.

Its new product will automatically route messages from a person’s most frequently-contacted acquaintances into a main inbox, with messages from other contacts pooled in a separate inbox.

It also does away with some traditional email customs, such as the "subject" line. Instead, all the messages between two people are threaded together into one long-running conversation.

Users will also be able to view Microsoft Word, Excel and PowerPoint documents as attachments to their messages, without having to download or pay for the software. Licensed users can create and send such documents as attachments.

Should all of Facebook’s active users adopt the new service, the social network would begin to approach the number of users now on Microsoft Corp’s hotmail, the most popular Internet email service.

Google, which controls roughly two-thirds of the global search market, offers the third-most popular Web email service, behind second-placed Yahoo, according to Web analytics firm comScore.

Last week, Google began blocking Facebook from importing user contact data from its Gmail email service - until Facebook reciprocates with its own trove of personal data.

In terms of potential privacy concerns, Zuckerberg stressed that the new service may actually be less intrusive than others’.

For instance, it would not automatically scan the contents of people’s email to display ads based on similar keywords, as is done by many of today’s popular Web-based email products like Gmail, he argued.

"Email is still really important to a lot of people. And we just think

that this simpler kind of messaging is going to be how a lot more people shift a lot of their communications," Zuckerberg said.

AOL Cracks Open Door to New Project Phoenix E-mail

You've still got mail - but AOL is redesigning it from the ground up to be faster and easier to use.

AOL Inc. is opening the doors to its new Web-based e-mail program, code-named Project Phoenix, for a limited number of users. Starting next year, anyone will be able to sign up for access to a beta test site.

The Project Phoenix inbox page was designed to make it easier to fire off a quick e-mail, text or instant message with just a few clicks on a "quick bar" at the top of the page. People can also send short replies right from the inbox page, without having to click on a message first. The new design displays thumbnails of recent photo attachments at a glance, and lets people toggle between several open e-mails at a time.

When someone is reading an e-mail with pictures attached, the photos will also show up as thumbnails next to the message. Addresses in the body of the e-mail will trigger the system to display a map from AOL's Mapquest on the right-hand side, with the option to click for directions.

Like Yahoo and other competitors, AOL is trying to become the one-stop shop for reading messages from other providers. Project Phoenix lets people link up their e-mail accounts on services from Microsoft Corp., Yahoo Inc. and Google Inc. In future versions, AOL plans to pull in Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn messages, too.

The early beta felt sluggish when a reporter tried it out recently, but AOL said its tests show that the Phoenix inbox page loads about twice as fast as Google's Gmail inbox.

Markedly absent from the new design: advertising. Fletcher Jones, the project lead for Phoenix, said AOL is working on other ways to make money from the free e-mail service because the old model - at least one towering, animated ad dominating the right-hand side of the screen - isn't very user-friendly. Jones would not say exactly what AOL's plan is, but one tactic is placing links to top AOL stories inside the inbox. AOL's content sites are more ad-heavy.

"We're a different company than we were a year ago," Jones said in an interview. "The prior administration had priorities on revenue versus audience growth. Our priorities are on audience growth."

About two weeks ago, the New York-based company overhauled the main AOL.com home page with more white space, hipper logo art, bolder photos and icons and a stronger focus on content from its network of websites and blogs. AOL Mail, which accounts for about 45 percent of AOL's total page views, is an important way to help users find all this new content. After all, Jones said, no matter what else is going on, people check their e-mail every day.

But AOL is juggling the need to attract new traffic with the fact that many of its users have been around since the days of dial-up Internet access. The company plans to give existing customers the option to use

the Project Phoenix system, and is providing live chat and other 24-hour customer service to support the transition. AOL doesn't have a firm plan for switching everyone over to the new design.

As people are invited into the Project Phoenix beta, they'll also have a chance to sign up for a new AOL e-mail address - a gift for folks who have come to regret their early aol.com screen name choices.

'Path' Social Network Limits Users to 50 Friends

Most people on Facebook have several hundred "friends," so it's safe to assume that the average person does not divulge their most private thoughts on the site. A new social network from a former Facebook executive, however, aims to tighten your personal network to just 50 people so you can feel more comfortable sharing details of your life.

The Personal Network, or Path, is a photo-based service that lets you upload photos and share that moment with your closest family and friends. It launched Monday as an iPhone app, but a Web-based version is also available.

Path is the brainchild of Dave Morin, a former senior platform manager at Facebook who will serve as Path's chief executive.

"Path allows you to capture your life's most personal moments and share them with the 50 close friends and family in your life who matter most," Morin wrote in a blog post.

"Because your personal network is limited to your 50 closest friends and family, you can always trust that you can post any moment, no matter how personal. Path is a place where you can be yourself."

Path is available as a free app in the App Store. Once downloaded, snap a photo with your iPhone or iPod touch and tag it as people, places, or things. "Think of it as a place for the memories along your path through life," he said.

When you upload a photo, you will be able to "See" who else shared in that moment. "The idea is that understanding enables trust and storytelling amongst close friends and family," Morin wrote. To keep things organized, you can view certain moments via a map of the world.

Why 50? "We chose 50 based on the research of Oxford Professor of Evolutionary Psychology Robin Dunbar, who has long suggested that 150 is the maximum number of social relationships that the human brain can sustain at any given time," he said. "Dunbar's research also shows that personal relationships tend to expand in factors of roughly three. So while we may have five people whom we consider to be our closest friends, and 20 whom we maintain regular contact with, 50 is roughly the outer boundary of our personal networks." There is no friending or following on the service, the company said, "just sharing with the people who matter most."

Those without an iPhone can register their username via the Path Web site. The company's jobs site also says they are looking for Android and BlackBerry engineers, so versions for those platforms are likely forthcoming.

Walmart to Sell Sub-$200 Laptop

Walmart plans to sell a fully equipped laptop with a 15.6-inch screen for US$198 on Black Friday as part of a promotional offering, one of the few times the $200 price barrier has been cracked.

The laptop will be on sale for a few hours in the retailer's stores on Nov. 26, which is one of the most active shopping days in the U.S.

Made by eMachines, the laptop includes features that could make it good for basic computing and day-to-day activities like Web surfing or word processing. It will come with an Intel Celeron processor running at 2.2GHz, a 250GB hard drive and 2GB of memory.

Further details about the laptop configuration were not immediately available. Walmart did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Laptop prices have hovered over $399 most of the year, and the $198 price represents one of the few times a laptops has been priced under $200. Last year, Walmart offered an HP Compaq Presario for $298 during the July back-to-school shopping season, and that prompted a pricing war with rival Best Buy, which started offering a Toshiba Satellite laptop at the same price.

Laptops offered at low prices typically lack some components. For example, the $298 Compaq Presario sold through Walmart last year lacked a webcam.

Consumers in the past have also expressed concerns about the Celeron processor, which sits on the lower rung of Intel's processor family ladder. Laptops with Celeron chips are not designed for high-end gaming or multimedia activities. Faster processors - like Intel's Core chips - are more expensive.

Walmart is also selling other consumer electronics such as Blu-ray players at low prices, according to the Walmart's Black Friday Web page.

Laptops are among the top technology products on holiday shopping lists in the U.S., topped only by tablets, according to a study released by Retrevo on Wednesday.

Once-Mighty MySpace Deepens Facebook Integration

In a sign of the companies' divergent fortunes, MySpace said Thursday it will let its users log in to their Facebook accounts through their MySpace page.

Doing so will port the likes and interests they have listed on their Facebook profiles to MySpace, where they will get a stream of entertainment content based on these interests.

MySpace users have already been able to sync their status updates to their Facebook profiles. Thursday's announcement is a deeper integration

of Facebook’s technology into MySpace. It doesn’t involve any financial transactions.

The integration of Facebook Connect into MySpace’s home page will be followed by the addition of Facebook’s "Like" buttons across MySpace, the company said.

Once a mighty rival, MySpace has conceded that it is no longer a social network but a social entertainment destination - think MTV for the Web 2.0 generation. To this end, the company recently overhauled its website to give its mostly young audience more ways to consume music, videos and celebrity gossip. CEO Mike Jones said in a conference call Thursday that the users’ initial response to the redesign is "very, very positive."

Facebook, meanwhile, is working to become the social overlay of the Web. Dan Rose, a Facebook vice president, called the integration with MySpace a "powerful demonstration of the Facebook platform."

Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp. bought MySpace for $580 million in 2005. After a promising start, the site began to lose its luster. Users and advertisers flocked to Facebook. In its most recent quarter, which ended Sept. 30, News Corp. said its "other" business segment, which includes MySpace and the rest of the Digital Media Group, reported an operating loss of $156 million, $30 million greater than a year earlier. The main reason for this was lower search and advertising revenues at MySpace.

PayPal Users Beware of Holiday Phishing Scam

With Black Friday quickly approaching, and retailers racing to outdo each other with earlier and earlier deals, it is safe to say that the holiday shopping season has begun. If you’re shopping online, though, and paying with PayPal - be warned. There is a phishing attack targeted just for you.

The holidays come with a dramatic spike in shopping, and nobody appreciates the increase in online commerce more than cyber criminals. While you’re preparing for a Thanksgiving celebration of beer and watching the Detroit Lions make a mockery of professional football... Hey, don’t judge. You try supporting a team that has been consistently sad for 60 years and see if you aren’t a little bitter. Fine. While you’re preparing for a traditional Thanksgiving feast and plotting your Black Friday shopping strategy, malware developers are hard at work finding ways to capitalize on the shopping season.

PayPal is established as a leading method of online payments. It is an integral part of eBay purchasing--a very popular way to acquire gifts during the holiday season, and it is widely accepted as a method of payment by online retailers of all sorts. It makes sense that cyber criminals would try to capitalize on the spike in PayPal transactions to catch naive or unsuspecting users off guard.

AppRiver’s Troy Gill has uncovered just such a scam. "Since so many people use PayPal in conjunction with the impending holiday shopping spree, scammers are looking to take full advantage of unwary consumers. The latest PayPal related scam targets PayPal users via email. Unlike most of the PayPal scams that we have seen in the past that included a link in the body of the message, these have an attached HTML. When the attachment is

clicked a Java Script will produce a Phishing page that mimics a legitimate PayPal page. The input information is then sent off to another domain that will make it available for the cybercriminals."

As Gill notes, this attack attempts to dupe victims by using an attachment as opposed to a link. Granted, users should be conditioned to avoid both links and file attachments in suspicious or questionable e-mails, but just switching things up from the normal malicious URL might be enough to snare some unwary users.

Once the attackers have the PayPal credentials entered on the spoofed PayPal page, they can transfer the funds out of the PayPal account, make purchases using the money in the PayPal account, request funds to be sent to the PayPal account, or anything else the legitimate account holder is normally able to do with a PayPal account.

Most avid PayPal customers hopefully know better than to fall for such a thing, but with the holidays and the spike in online shopping comes a deluge of newbies who know enough to use PayPal to make purchases, but aren’t seasoned in how to protect it.

Gill warns, "During the next few months you should be aware that you will be a broader target for scammers looking to take advantage of your increased purchasing activity. Since most people will be making a far greater number of purchases on their credit cards around the holidays they would be less likely to notice fraudulent activity on their cards."

Just remember the mantra that common sense and cautious skepticism will prevent almost all attacks. Happy Holidays!

Pirate-Slaying Censorship Bill Gets Unanimous Support

The Combating Online Infringement and Counterfeits Act (COICA) sets up a system through which the US government can blacklist a pirate website from the Domain Name System, ban credit card companies from processing US payments to the site, and forbid online ad networks from working with the site. This morning, COICA unanimously passed the Senate Judiciary Committee.

"We are disappointed that the Senate Judiciary Committee this morning chose to disregard the concerns of public-interest groups, Internet engineers, Internet companies, human-rights groups and law professors in approving a bill that could do great harm to the public and to the Internet," said Public Knowledge president Gigi Sohn, who pledged to craft a "more narrowly tailored bill" next year to deal with "rogue websites."

But the content industries don’t mind the current version. Bob Pisano, who runs the MPAA, trotted out the "2.4 million hard working, middle-class jobs in all 50 states" that his industry creates. "For these workers and their families, digital theft means declining incomes, lost jobs and reduced health and retirement benefits," he said. "Unfortunately, this means nothing to the operators of rogue websites who seek to benefit illegally from the hard work of others."

The industry is well aware that "censorship" doesn’t go down well with many Americans, so it has been playing up the "free speech protections" in the bill lately. RIAA CEO Mitch Bainwol made sure to stress the point

again this morning.

"With this first vote, Congress has begun to strike at the lifeline of foreign scam sites, while protecting free speech and boosting the legal online marketplace," he said. "Those seeking to thwart this bipartisan bill are protecting online thieves and those who gain pleasure and profit from de-valuing American property."

That last jibe is the sort of comment made by those who can't understand why, say, people accused of horrific crimes still get defense lawyers. ("Why do you want murderers to go free?") It's sad to see Bainwol resort to it. As we noted earlier this week, we have concerns about this approach that are premised in large part on the content industries' almost comically misguided attempts to lock down or shutter innovative technologies and websites that turn out in fact to be legal and hugely useful - like the VCR, HD radio, MP3 players, HDTV, DAT, and YouTube.

Giving that industry a special process, one that doesn't apply to sites that traffic in other sorts of illegal-in-the-US-activity, raises concerns that have nothing to do with a love of widespread piracy. COICA could censor even sites that "enable or facilitate a violation" of copyright, it mucks about with DNS, and it actually requires the US Attorney General to keep a list of "naughty" sites even though no action has been taken against them. There has to be a more careful approach.

Chinese Woman Sent to Labor Camp for Retweeting

China has sentenced a woman to a year in a labor camp for "disrupting social order" by retweeting a satirical message urging Chinese protesters to smash the Japan pavilion at the Shanghai Expo, an international rights group said.

Cheng Jianping, 46, re-posted a message from the social networking site Twitter last month hinting that Chinese protesters should smash the Japan pavilion at the Shanghai Expo and adding on the message "Angry youth, charge!" according to Amnesty International, which condemned the sentence in a statement late Thursday.

Amnesty and Cheng's fiance said her retweet was meant as satire, mocking anti-Japanese protesters who had grown in number since tensions between the countries increased after a dispute erupted in September over islands claimed by both Japan and China.

"Sentencing someone to a year in a labor camp, without trial, for simply repeating another person's clearly satirical observation on Twitter demonstrates the level of China's repression of online expression," Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Director Sam Zarifi said in a statement.

Cheng's fiance, Hua Chunhui, said he thought the government reacted the way it did to the tweet was because they are activists. The two had planned to get their marriage license Oct. 28, the same day Cheng was detained.

"My personal opinion is that this sentencing wasn't about this one statement. The government wants to make an example of us activists," said Hua, who lives in Wuxi in China's eastern province of Jiangsu. "The

government doesn’t like what we do. We actively communicate with other Chinese activists and celebrated on Twitter Liu Xiaobo’s Nobel prize."

Hua told The Associated Press that he posted the original tweet because he was mad at all the anti-Japanese protests.

"So I posted that message on Twitter, satirically saying that if they really want to do something big, they should just get on a plane and attack the Japan pavilion at the expo. Of course, that is not possible."

The Shanghai Expo was a major event treated with great sensitivity by China and any threats against it would have been taken seriously by the government. Authorities pulled out all the stops to make sure it was a success and imposed heavy security to ensure there were no disruptions. More than 70 million people visited it before it closed at the end of October after its six-month run.

Government officials could not immediately be reached for comment.

Twitter is blocked in China, but some human rights activists use it by bypassing government controls.

Hua said his fiance arrived at a labor re-education center in central China’s Henan Province on Wednesday evening. He said he is not allowed to visit her.

Cheng’s sentencing comes as China is under fire for its hardline reaction to the Liu’s winning of the Nobel Peace Prize. A Nobel official said Thursday that the award and prize may not be able to be handed out this year because China is not likely to let anyone from Liu’s family attend the ceremony.

Outraged by the award, Beijing has reportedly clamped down on Liu’s relatives and pressured other countries not to send representatives to the Dec. 10 award ceremony in Oslo.

The prestigious 10 million kronor ($1.4 million) award can only be collected by the laureate or close family members.

Liu, a Chinese dissident, is serving an 11-year sentence for subversion after co-authoring an appeal calling for reforms to China’s one-party political system. His wife, Liu Xia, has been under house arrest and subject to police escort since the award was announced last month.

E-mail’s Lowly ‘at’ So Much More Around the World

The squiggly little "at" symbol that makes our e-mail go is more colorful in translation.

It’s an elephant’s trunk in Sweden. A monkey in Serbia - and a more, ahem, delicate part of the monkey in Holland. It’s a snail in Korea, a little mouse in Taiwan.

In any language, it’s come a long way since it was plucked from obscurity by e-mail godfather Ray Tomlinson back in computer-heady 1971. At the time, the character was used almost exclusively by grocers and accountants.

Its use made good sense to an English speaker, shifting definitions from a rate or amount of something to a location.

"It’s the only preposition on the keyboard," Tomlinson said from Cambridge, Mass., where he works as he has for decades at Raytheon BBN Technologies.

But the connection was lost in other languages, and more visual references to food, animals and body parts sprang up, many based on the at’s swirling shape. The symbol is still so unfamiliar that some newspaper and web systems can’t print it in this story.

"It’s sort of like a Rorschach test. The language would sort of see in the at sign something notable from the culture. What people are familiar with is just so varied, so all these crazy things came out of it," said Karen Steffen Chung, an associate professor of linguistics, English and phonetics at National Taiwan University in Taipei.

The symbol is a strudel in Israel and a "rollmop" - for rolled pickled herring fillet - in Czech. It’s "sobachka" for doggie in Russian, was dubbed an "alpha curl" in Norway and sometimes goes by "kanelbulle," a type of traditional cinnamon bun, in Swedish.

Sweden can’t seem to make up its mind with the longest list of monikers, including elephant’s trunk, elephant’s ear, monkey’s tail, cat foot, cat’s tail and pretzel.

Chung was so intrigued that she reached out to fellow linguists around the world in (what else) e-mail for their insights.

Among the things she discovered was a variety of terms in Serbian. The word "majmun" is one. It means monkey, appears to have been borrowed from Turkish and was used in "majmunski rep" (monkey tail) and "majmunsko-a" (monkey-ish a). The Serbs also invented "ludo-a" (crazy a) for the symbol none of us can escape.

Some countries have "official" terms for the at. The Swedish Language Board deemed it "snabel-a" (trunk-a), meaning "a" with an elephant’s trunk. Elsewhere, English prevails, including in Finland, South Africa and India.

The spin on "at" in Holland is English, too, but "apeklootje" (little monkey’s testicle) was once in play during the sign’s rapid rise to stardom. In Sri Lanka, the government agency responsible for promoting information technology on the island nation has no specific word for the symbol in Sinhala, referring to it simply as the "at symbol."

Local pronunciations of the English where other languages dominate include "et" for "a" in Serbian and "ah-te" (think Ted without the d) in mainland China. Mandarin Chinese hasn’t come up with a character for the revolutionary sign.

Japanese, known for borrowing from other languages with a distinctive local pronunciation, usually go for "atto maaku," meaning the English "at," while Greek turned the squiggle into a "little duck" and Hungarian a "little worm."

Arab speakers sometimes translate the English "at" to its equivalent, "fi," though others see it as an "ear" instead when providing their

e-mail addresses.

In Taiwan, where Chung lives, the local meaning is "little mouse," a lot livelier than Korean’s snail. The preferred word in Spanish is "arroba," which is also a unit of weight, though in Spain at can transform into a swirly pastry from Majorca, "ensaimada."

To some in Latin America, the at has grown linguistic muscle to stand in as a gender-neutral indication of both male and female (nin(at)s means you’re talking about both ninos and ninas).

Slovenian speakers prefer "afna," possibly borrowed from German, where the at is called, among other things, "affenschwanz" (monkey’s tail). A similar word in Slovenian means "a woman who overdresses, applies too much makeup etc.," Chung learned.

Tomlinson didn’t have the world’s many "ats" on his mind when he developed his e-mail protocol using a nearly forgotten key on a Model 33 Teletype machine for use on ARPANET, one of the networks that became the global Internet.

It was Tomlinson who decided to append the at sign and the host name to a user’s login identity. Not only did it make sense as a preposition, but it was unlikely to be confused for any other part of a user’s e-mail address, a term that hadn’t yet surfaced.

The succinctness of the at sign, he thinks, played into the imagery in other languages.

"They certainly all tend to be taking something that’s more familiar than some dry piece of commercial signage," Tomlinson said. "It’s a simple symbol and it’s been adopted and sort of been made into a fan icon for anything to do with computers."

The Museum of Modern Art is a fan. It "acquired" the symbol for its collection earlier this year.

At 69, the low-key Tomlinson is still working as a programmer on projects unrelated to e-mail. Have his two grown daughters made full use of bragging rights over dad’s e-mail claim to fame?

"They try to be cooler than that," Tomlinson said.

Comodo’s GeekBuddy Offers Instant Help

Comodo recently received the Parent Tested Parent Approved (PTPA Seal of Approval for its GeekBuddy computer help service. Products receive this recognition after testing by a group of families selected from 40,000 volunteers belonging to the PTPA. They may be onto something.

Like LiveTech from CyberDefender, GeekBuddy offers 24/7 help for all kinds of computer problems including, but not limited to antivirus help, PC performance tuneup, third-party software installation and general PC troubleshooting. But where the LiveTech service starts at $239/year, GeekBuddy costs $49.95/year.

There are differences between the two services. LiveTech focuses on

phone-based support supplied by a team based in the United States while GeekBuddy helps users via live chat and remote control. Don't worry; if the computer is too screwed up to permit live chat GeekBuddy does have 24/7 phone support available - it's just not their primary mode of communication.

CyberDefender quite reasonably touts the virtue of having LiveTech support agents all in one secure facility with policies in place to protect subscribers' private data. LiveTech supports both Windows and Mac and also offers support for other tech devices such as mobile phones. Comodo's MCSE-certified agents specifically support Windows and third-party peripherals and software.

Comodo's Internet Security Complete, normally $69.99, comes as a free bonus for GeekBuddy subscribers. This package includes Comodo Antivirus 5.0 as well as a full-scale firewall, a utility to secure WiFi connections, and 10 GB of online backup. And customers get to keep this package even if they end their GeekBuddy subscription.

Access to the service is as simple as clicking the GeekBuddy desktop icon, but Comodo's geeks don't just wait to be called. The service will periodically offer to perform PC maintenance tasks including checking all drivers to make sure they're current and running performance tune-ups. LiveTech users do get an initial diagnostic and tune-up call but thereafter must ask for help when needed.

Both services offer unlimited help requests during the subscription period. LiveTech admittedly aims for the less-technical user, so phone-based support definitely makes sense for them. Comodo's chat-based system requires at least a minimal level of familiarity with technology. At the moment Comodo is offering 60 days of GeekBuddy support for free. That's hard to beat.

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